

MA THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

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PRESS RELEASE

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RALPH STEINER PHOTOGRAPHS
August 14 - October 7, 1984

Twenty photographs spanning the career of Ralph Steiner, one of America's most versatile photographers, will be on view at The Cleveland Museum of Art from August 14 through October 7, 1984. Steiner, who has been taking pictures professionally since the 1920s, established his reputation with sharply focused and carefully composed photographs of urban scenes--views of skyscrapers, houses, billboards, and automobiles--but he is also known for candid and revealing portraits, landscapes, and lyrical studies of nature and commonplace objects. He is equally celebrated as a filmmaker, with over thirty documentary and art films to his credit. The photographs in this exhibition, printed by Steiner in 1980 from negatives made between 1921 and 1980, demonstrate his visual sensitivity and the range of his interests. They were selected from a private collection by Tom E. Hinson, curator of contemporary art at The Cleveland Museum of Art.

Born in 1899 in Cleveland, Steiner began taking photographs at the age of fifteen. At Dartmouth College, which he attended from 1917 to 1921, he emulated the style of the pictorialist photographers of the time, taking atmospheric, soft-focus pictures of the New Hampshire landscape. Between 1921 and 1922, while studying composition and design at the Clarence H. White School of Photography in New York, he began to sharpen his camera lens, focusing on everyday subjects and scenes with strongly defined forms. During the twenties he was particularly fascinated by buildings, billboards, and signs, often using them to make wry

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commentaries on the idiosyncracies of modern society. To support himself while he photographed subjects that interested him, Steiner worked as an advertising and public relations photographer.

In 1927 he met Paul Strand whose clear, direct approach to photography had a profound influence on Steiner's subsequent work. Nearly a decade later, the two men joined forces, under the direction of Pare Lorentz, to make one of America's first documentary films, a report on the plight of the Dust Bowl farmers, entitled The Plow That Broke the Plains. Steiner, who had been making short art films since the late twenties, devoted his time largely to filmmaking during the late thirties and forties. Following World War II he was employed as a photographer by Fortune Magazine. During the sixties, he turned once again to filmmaking, composing a series entitled The Joy of Seeing.

In 1970 Steiner moved from New York City to Vermont, where he still lives and works. In his recent photography, he has returned to nature, producing a series of photographs of trees, clouds, and water. His prints have been widely exhibited and can be found in the collections of major museums. His autobiography, A Point of View, published by Wesleyan University Press in 1978, explains his philosophy of photography and contains many illustrations of his work.

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